**The Rule of Optimism**

One quote from the report into the tragic death of Baby Peter was that “There was a pervasive belief among professionals that the baby’s injuries were accidental”. In this way the professionals clearly found it difficult to appreciate that the injuries they were witnessing might be the result of abuse, and held an over-optimistic view of Baby Peter’s circumstances. Professionals applying a “rule of optimism” have been a feature of Serious Case Reviews for many years. The meaning that some professionals attributed to their observations about the family was that they tended to be optimistic and were always thinking the best of families. This has often occurred in the face of contrary evidence that all was well and led to significant concerns being missed and children not being protected.

First of all it is very important to recognise that to be optimistic with families about their achievements, their parenting abilities and to praise parents and children when there is evidence of positive change is extremely important in the development of effective working relationships with families. It is however inappropriate to be optimistic when there is no evidence to support your optimism.

The “rule of optimism” has figured little in literature or research regarding safeguarding practice, but it is something that I have come across consistently in my work with Serious Case Reviews over recent years, and consider that it is something that all professionals need to be alert to in their day to day work. Here are a few thoughts about how you could address this issue and check out that you are not becoming over optimistic.

* Remember that most people who choose to work in the caring professions have a natural tendency to see the good in people. We must not lose this important attribute, but we need to recognise that it is a frame of mind that may sometimes lead us into unthinkingly taking a positive view about families.
* Lord Laming talked of the need for professionals to apply “respectful uncertainty” in their dealings with families and not to take everything at face value.
* It is important to check out the evidence for the views you hold – if you think there has been positive change, what is the actual evidence of this – perhaps list them?
* The longer that a professional works with a family and forms an effective working relationship with them, then the greater the likelihood for the “rule of optimism” to occur. A professional in these circumstances may find it harder to recognise incidents of concern, perhaps because they think it might reflect on their work with the family, or because over time it has become difficult to be objective about what is observed.
* Identify signals which might suggest you have become part of the family system and are no longer objective. An over friendly relationship in which the family expect you to share a lot of your own personal or family experiences, or where they behave in such a way that they treat you more as a friend than as a professional, all may mean that you will find it increasingly hard to recognise incidents of concern when and if they arise. Try to re-establish the professional and objective stance that you need to take.
* Whilst it is very important to aim for parents and carers to be cooperative with the work being undertaken with them and their children, this does not automatically mean that any risk to the children has lessened. Do not apply more credit to their cooperation than it deserves – remember that there is the concept of “disguised compliance”.
* Be careful not to downgrade incidents or evidence of past concerns based on recent improvements in parenting. If there were significant concerns about parenting from previous observations, incidents or assessments, then it is important to match any more recent improvements against these – i.e. is it realistic for such a significant positive change to occur so quickly?
* Also, sometimes organisational constraints such as workloads, and expectations to close cases etc. May have an impact on judgements about families that they have achieved sufficient change, when in reality this may not be the case.

I hope these few thoughts help you in your day to day work with families.

**Ron Lock, Independent Chair**

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